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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the turbulent policy environment of school-district leaders by placing five topics under the microscope. Using a first-person narrative, the report describes the move toward a public/private partnership for student transportation, the amalgamation of school boards, issues surrounding governance, school closures, dealing with a major schoolyard incident, interacting with the media, the system leader as vision builder, the system leader as human-relations specialist, the system leader responding to challenges, and the system leader's approach to change. The paper stresses that at a particular point in time, turbulence will cease and the system leader will be able to address leadership in a stable environment; system leaders must avoid the temptation to view their roles as strategic and not operational; and school board members must understand that a system leader must adopt an eclectic approach for change. It concludes that system leaders can no longer depend on the support of elected school-board members, and that the shift to decentralization and community involvement will demand understanding as well as a change in leadership and attitude. Structural change, change that rarely intersects with learning, will not affect the classroom without hard work and constant attention. (RJM)

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

LEADERSHIP IN A TURBULENT POLICY ENVIRONMENT

1999 AERA ANNUAL MEETING
MONTREAL, CANADA

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS: EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

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LEADERSHIP IN A TURBULENT POLICY ENVIRONMENT

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS: EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

INTRODUCTION

Education systems today operate in an environment of considerable change and challenge. There is an increasing public demand for higher standards, better quality student and system performance, enhanced opportunities to meet the needs of a diverse student population, and for greater collaboration and partnership between schools and the communities they serve.

Government action in the field of education is a major factor fueling these dramatic changes and this is placing considerable pressure on school district leaders and schools. Government action includes the amalgamation of school Boards, a focus on large-scale assessment projects, and a multitude of curriculum initiatives. At the same time governments are reducing the influence of teacher associations, reducing education budgets, and granting greater decision-making authority to local school councils. These are all high stakes actions that affect school leaders.

BACKGROUND

The Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) is a large urban-rural Board in the Province of Nova Scotia. An amalgamation of three predecessor Boards, HRSB consists of 58,000 students, 7500 employees, and a budget of $270M. I was appointed Superintendent in May 1996. The Board is three years into its amalgamation and, like a stranded ship at high tide, it is beginning to move forward.

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility and the federal government only enters the field in very indirect ways. The Province of Nova Scotia is comprised of seven regional school Boards with elected School Board members who serve three-year terms. The Province provides approximately eighty percent of funding to Boards while local municipalities generate the remainder through mandatory taxation.

THE ENVIRONMENT OF SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS

This paper will recreate the turbulent policy environment of school district leaders by placing five topics under the microscope. These include a public-private partnership for student transportation, an amalgamation of school Boards, a major schoolyard incident, district governance, and the role of the media.
These topics are examples of the issues that currently occupy center stage for school district leaders throughout North America. The paper will conclude with reflections on the issues and some implications for school leaders.

A PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP FOR STUDENT TRANSPORTATION

Introduction. In March 1996, before amalgamation, one of the predecessor Boards concluded a successful conversion of its student transportation services, from Board owned to privately owned, via a partnership with the private sector. This action was the culmination of tremendous effort by many staff members and my involvement was crucial at three distinct stages.

First, fiscal restraint was forcing scrutiny of all aspects of the Board's budget including transportation. The partnership concept as proposed by the private sector had merit yet was widely opposed by Board transportation staff. It was evident that we could save considerable dollars in this area and I pushed my staff into action.

Second, Board-employed drivers lobbied Board members and the community against the proposal with their chief weapon being safety concerns. I knew the same drivers who had won safety awards for years would not suddenly become unsafe if we partnered with the private sector. I decided to accept an invitation to every public meeting called by the union and my message was clear and consistent, "Guaranteed jobs, wages, benefits, safety, and savings."

Finally, the negotiations with our private partner were crucial to my credibility. While I was confident in my public meetings, I had to ensure the final agreement outlined the terms I set out in the public forum.

Analysis. Student transportation is not typically an area that would involve the time and effort of the educational leader — the Superintendent. Nevertheless, the change was not going to occur without an initial push from me nor my shepherding of the change throughout the process. The concept of a public-private partnership had to be cast in the context of creating more resources for the classroom. The change had to acknowledge the excellent work of our current staff and faithful employees of many years. Finally, the elected board who would ultimately make the decision had to be represented at all stages of the process. This would enable staff to have a few allies once the proposal was presented to the Board for final approval.

AMALGAMATIONS

Introduction. There are many universal drivers for the amalgamation of school boards. These include the increasing demand for greater accountability; concern for our ability to compete internationally; taxpayer resistance to the growth, size, and cost of public bureaucracies; and government preoccupation with deficits and public debt. Amalgamations have a significant impact on employees and their associations.

Employees. There are many employee issues arising from the amalgamation of school districts. These issues include the impact of having an open competition for all central office positions, policy for the new organization, and the inevitable employee "grieving process". The high expectations of colleagues for key jobs in the new organization, transition planning, and communications are major challenges in building the new organization. Our employees experienced tremendous pressure because of the requirement to end school in June as three former Boards and open in September as one Board with a new organization structure and new people in new assignments.

Unions. Unions have been slow to respond to the new organization as union leadership is typically stuck in an old paradigm. The union is formally grieving the fact that our Human Resources Director is not a teacher. There were multiple local agreements to consolidate and negotiate and while the unions wanted to "cherry pick" their articles, we wanted a brand new collective agreement. There were wage parity issues arising from the consolidation of the contracts. Two of the former Boards had always sought harmony with their unions and this produced expensive

collective agreements. Finally, the unions saw seniority as an essential issue while we saw competence and qualifications as the essential issue.

The important element for our success here was the recruitment of a new Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Director due to a retirement and before negotiations. This individual, a human resource specialist, brought new thinking to the organization with special attention to negotiations. The result was to conclude four collective agreements in twelve months.

Analysis. The amalgamation process to date has been successful but it will continue for another two to three years. If I were doing it over again, I would contract for the short-term services of a transition coordinator to assist with change, and a communications manager to liase with the employees. I would then carefully consider maintaining some elements of the three former Boards until there was a transition plan communicated to all staff. Finally, I would recruit widely and recruit for a vision rather than believe we had to find a job for all displaced employees.

So why didn't I? The provincial Department of Education drove the process under the direction of an amalgamation coordinator. The structure was prepared before my appointment as Superintendent and there was Board interference in the hiring process for senior positions. The amalgamation was forced and most Board members were looking out for their former employees and former school regions.

The alarming thing about amalgamations is how little they directly influence the teaching and learning relationship in the classroom. At the same time, the indirect impact of the amalgamation process is amazing. For example, teachers in at least one school were keeping score on the staff bulletin Board regarding the number of their former Board supervisors still in place. That can impact in an indirect way on what happens in the classroom if it keeps the staff in a constant turmoil.

At the same time it is also important to understand the degree of change one can introduce simply because there is a turbulent environment. This includes new relationships with the elected Board and a refocusing their role on policy matters rather than operational matters.

GOVERNANCE

Introduction. Any image of future schools will include greater collaboration and partnership between schools and the communities they serve. This has tremendous consequences for school district leaders, as it requires a change in the way they address critical issues. This section will address the issue of closing underutilized schools and the position adopted by the elected school board.

School Closures. In 1996, two months after the creation of the amalgamated Board, staff took forward a list of seven schools for possible permanent closure. The prescribed process was followed faithfully, including community involvement. At the end of the process, in a highly charged arena, the Board of the day voted to keep the seven schools open. The highly divisive process did not serve the community nor the school region well and left parents with uncertainty about the future of their schools.

In 1997, while the same seven schools still qualified for review, there was a school Board election scheduled for the same time as a review of schools for closure. Staff decided not to proceed and chose to wait a year.

This year, more specifically the fall of 1998, staff chose a different course of action. This time, we identified the schools that met the criteria for review, however, we did not recommend any for closure. As an alternative, I recommended the Board engage the school community in a dialogue to help both parties better understand the issues. I proposed that the Board try to appreciate the role of the school as the community education center and that the school community better understand the financial implications of keeping underutilized schools open. The Board went against my recommendation, ordered a review of three schools, and on April 14, 1999, approved their closure.

Analysis. I find the Board's action on the school closure issue to be most disturbing and to hold the most potential for damage to the public education system. Indeed, elsewhere in our province parents are occupying schools due to close and are conducting sit-ins in the offices of government officials. Is this the relationship we want with our communities? The school community in HRSB believes the decision to close the three schools was made well before the community meetings to receive parent input. The Board went against my recommendation as

Superintendent, a fact that would emerge time and time again in the public forum as parents fought to keep their schools open.

A MAJOR SCHOOLYARD INCIDENT

Introduction. In October 1997, a relatively minor incident ignited a major racial conflict at a local high school. The incident resulted in the closure of the school for several days with teachers refusing to return to class until I took action to make the school a safe place to for them and their students. The immediate resolve to the incident was a series of meetings including a large community meeting at the school where more than one thousand parents and community members came together to hear our plans to resolve the matter.

As Superintendent my strategy was not to reopen the school until school staff and the community could ensure a safe and orderly environment for students. That calculated risk galvanized students, staff, and parents and they vowed to "take back their school".

Analysis. This schoolyard incident generates several leadership questions. How did the Superintendent get immersed in the issue, for how long, and how did he extract himself from it? How do you strategize in this highly charged environment?

This incident is one that highlights the loneliness of the job. Certainly there was consultation; however, the Board and the communities looked to the Superintendent to resolve the issue. The school itself, ultimately the vehicle for progress, was demanding the Superintendent solve the problem. The school, with the assistance of their School Advisory Council, is now making wonderful strides as they move forward in a variety of ways.

MEDIA

Introduction. The events described in this paper all attract media attention and this provides a great opportunity to address the community. System leaders

frequently view the media as the villain rather than a vehicle for change. The media have a keen interest in our work because their audience has a strong investment in education. I determined very early that I would adopt an open door policy with the media. I never wanted to see or hear the words " unavailable for comment."

Analysis. The media is a powerful medium to convey the goals of the school system to the community and to garner support. This was particularly true at the time of contract negotiations when we were able to promote the notion of competence and qualification as opposed to seniority when selecting and placing teachers in classrooms. When these matters arise, the community already has an opinion of credibility and trust that has grown through previous events.

There is, however, a down side to this open door to the media. While I did delegate many topics, the Superintendent's role became associated with turbulence rather than as the educational leader in the community. On the other hand, comments from the general public are extremely positive and the public holds the Superintendent's role in high regard. The recognition factor is high and with it the sense that the organization cares and is proactive.

REFLECTIONS

There is always a danger that real life stories of a retiring Superintendent may be nothing more than interesting "battles from the field." This reflection section will focus on four aspects of system leadership; namely, vision building, personal qualities, response to challenges, and approaches to change. It includes a brief commentary and some implications for leaders.

THE SYSTEM LEADER AS VISION BUILDER

Commentary. When I assumed the role as Superintendent of the amalgamated Board I promoted an image of future schools that had its roots in research. The essential components were schools with high levels of public confidence, schools as community education centers, and schools as learning organizations. While I did not engage any groups in the development of this vision, I used every opportunity to

reinforce it and to link decisions to the vision. These opportunities included principals meetings, the local PDK chapter meetings, school board meetings, and any other invitations to speak on the work of the Board as it moved through the early stages of amalgamation. Despite these opportunities many would comment that the district "lacked a vision".

This approach to vision building conflicts with the more comprehensive strategic planning approach that follows a prescribed format, involves representatives from the various groups with an interest in education, and generates a mission statement for the Board. Such a participatory process is expensive and requires considerable preparation time. I required a vision for the new Board and I required it quickly. I accept that this puts me at odds with the current focus on collaboration yet it was a defensible position at the time.

The school closure issue provided me with an opportunity to reinforce the vision of schools as community education centers. In 1998, unlike 1996, I advocated for greater dialogue with the community and less reliance on the more formal process that always breeds confrontation. The Board went in another direction.

Implications. In reflecting upon my action regarding vision building, I believe there are several important implications.

- In creating a vision, take the time necessary to secure buy-in from staff. At the same time, employ participatory strategies that extend the result beyond a succinct mission statement. Such statements do not always spark commitment and action.

- Use day-to-day operations as a vehicle to support the vision. If you wait for pure planning time you will lose pertinent opportunities.

- Adopt a ready-fire-aim-approach to vision building and balance that with effective planning. Collaboration must be balanced with action.

THE SYSTEM LEADER AS HUMAN RELATIONS SPECIALIST

Commentary. On retirement, people comment on your contribution to education. Some people say it through cards while others provide a written comment and

include a personal anecdote. These comments are a source for the leadership qualities that make a difference in the lives of a few people. I offer a few of these below in a personal context.

The comments I receive speak to support and guidance, leadership and guidance, honesty, hard work, support for students, a positive impact on the day-to-day lives of employees, and personal support from an employee experiencing difficulties with change. I also recall a comment that expressed how important it was to one employee that I spoke to her by name every morning as I passed by her desk. How simple can it get?

Finally, in spite of the turbulent environment described earlier, I can report a positive relationship with bus drivers, employees and parents in schools reviewed for closure, the community that experienced racial conflict, and the media.

Implications. This brief assessment serves to reinforce some traditional positions regarding strong human relations. At the same time, how often do we forget these simple facts?

- System leaders must remember they are not the only employees buffeted by the turbulent environment. It is expected as a part of that leadership role more than that of other roles within the organization.

- System leaders succeed when employees succeed and we can help them in very simple ways.

- Guidance and mentoring are still huge value added strategies for system leaders to employ.

- System leaders must be prepared to stand alone in supporting individual employees through the turbulent times as they cope with the new realities.

- System leaders must not "burn bridges" behind them as they implement change and impact employees, schools, and the communities they serve.

THE SYSTEM LEADER AND RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

Commentary. The events described above represent a very common reality for system leaders, yet we often approach our work believing a more steady state is within our grasp. On reflection, the new status quo is likely to be characterized by turbulence of many forms. How we lead and how we respond to the challenges that accompany turbulence will be critical for personal success and the success of the organization.

The school Board was expecting me to recommend schools for closure using the formal, divisive process that was available. Staff members did not want to tackle the transportation project even though considerable savings would result. Finally, during the schoolyard incident clear direction was demanded in order to create the right climate for local change and long-term improvement.

Implications.

- We must always tackle major challenges from the perspective of the vision for the organization as each challenge presents an opportunity for progress. Furthermore, leaders must not neglect the day-to-day challenges (operational issues), as they are a strong vehicle for moving forward.

- System leaders must develop an instinct for going it alone vs. engaging the broader school community. The proper balance is always a continuous pursuit; however, seeking advice is a common element at every point along the way.

THE SYSTEM LEADER AND APPROACH TO CHANGE

Commentary. The turbulent environment of system leaders requires an eclectic approach to change with any one choice dependent on the nature of the matter under review. The amalgamation process likely demanded a stronger, more authoritarian approach than I gave it. It may not have been the time for a participatory style. The transportation project demanded an initial thrust followed

by a shepherding approach to keep it on track. The schoolyard incident called for decisive leadership, recognizing that the long term resolution and change in the school would switch quickly to the school staff and community. The school closure issue required leadership to the process, convincing others of the value in adopting a framework that highlights the school as a community education center, and seeing that the Board's interests were fairly represented in the process.

Implications

- System leaders must avoid the temptation to view their roles as strategic not operational. There are times when a more hands-on approach will pay dividends. The transportation project and the schoolyard incident are examples.

- The school Board and senior staff must understand the necessity for the system leader to adopt an eclectic approach to change. While there is a comfort level in a consistent approach, diversity will expand the range of potential strategies for success.

CONCLUSION

"Leadership in a Turbulent Policy Environment" suggests that at a particular point in time, the turbulence will cease and we will address leadership in a stable environment. While the turbulence may subside to allow the flight attendants to resume service, I suggest it will never allow us to undo our seatbelts. Indeed, if that happens, publicly funded education will be in jeopardy.

Structural changes, a major schoolyard incident, and ongoing tensions relating to centralization versus decentralization were opportunities for progress. At the same time, decisions at the elected trustee level were relatively unfocused and subject to political influence. Throughout all of this, the system has moved forward.

My relatively short two-year contract, with provision to renew for one more year, was influential in focusing my attention on the process/task of bringing the Boards

together. At the same time, I was establishing a vision or direction for the Board. The image of future schools was an appropriate framework for action and allowed me to shape day-to-day decisions in a longer-term context.

It is my view that the current turbulent environment is different than it was several years ago. While change has been a constant for a number of years the current situation is different for the following reasons:

1. System leaders can no longer depend on the support and confidence of elected school board members; consequently, staff recommendations can go astray.

2. The shift to decentralization and community involvement, while potentially a potent approach for improving student learning, will demand understanding as well as a change in leadership and attitude.

3. One and two may create a very dysfunctional arena for leadership that will challenge traditional approaches and demand flexibility.

4. Second and third order changes will be mandatory if we are to make substantive changes in teaching and learning.

5. Our current preoccupation with structural change, change that rarely intersects with learning, will not impact the classroom without hard work and constant attention.

6. A mentality by system leaders and elected Boards that "we dare to tackle the tough issues" will result in community dissatisfaction with the Board. This may jeopardize the development of schools as community education centers.

System leaders typically aspire to their roles out of a desire to make a difference for students. Ironically, the ability to influence seems inversely proportional to one's position in the education hierarchy. The turbulent policy environments we face will erode the leadership capabilities of staff unless we accept the idea of a strong, proactive role within an environment that begs for collaboration. How do we prepare our future leaders for such an environment?